

Good Friday
John 18:1-19:42

You Are Absent to Me*

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The Church of the Transfiguration
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The French have a unique way of saying “I miss you.” They don’t say “*je te manque*,” which would be the usual grammatical construction for “I miss you.” Instead, they say “*tu me manques*,” which literally means “you are absent to me.” The focus of the sentence is on the one who is absent or gone – and not the speaker.

“You are absent to me.” It’s a fitting way to describe the painful, haunting feeling of absence when a loved one is away or gone. Although the loved one is no longer there physically, you can still feel his or her presence lingering on – much like a cloud of incense that hangs over us in church during solemn high mass. Or like the final note of an organ postlude that remains with us, even as the piece itself has ended.

Good Friday, more than any other day in the liturgical year, is a day of absence. We have an absence of music when the clergy and acolytes enter. We have an absence of the usual vestments and liturgical words. We have an absence of ornamentation on the altar, which was stripped bare at the end of last night’s Maundy Thursday mass. And we have an absence of consecration – since Good Friday is the one day of the year on which no eucharistic prayer is said.

“You are absent to me.” Jesus feels acutely the absence of God as he hangs on the cross. Psalm 22 opens with the words that he cries out: “*Eli, eli, lama sabachthani*.” That is, “My God, my God, why have you forsaken me?”

And in today’s gospel reading from John, we hear about how the apostles are painfully absent to Jesus after he is arrested. They flee and are nowhere to be found during his trial, his passion, and – other than the beloved disciple and the three Marys – his crucifixion. Even Peter, the rock upon which the church is eventually built, denies Jesus three times. As they say, success has many fathers, but failure is an orphan.

But it’s not just the apostles who are absent to Jesus. When might we, as the present-day disciples of Jesus, have fallen short and turned our backs on him? When might Christ be saying to each of us: “you are absent to me”? When might Christ be saying “*tu me manques*,” or “I miss you”?

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And yet, when we are in the midst of this absence, we discover that, paradoxically, Good Friday is not just about absence. It is also a day of presence. Beauty is still present all around us, especially in the simplicity of the liturgy. We are present with Jesus at the crucifixion, journeying across time and space, through our veneration of the cross. And the Body and Blood of Christ is really and truly present with us, having been consecrated last night.

Traditionally, we think of Good Friday as “good” because Jesus died for our sins on this day. According to the usual theologies of atonement, Jesus paid the ultimate price on the cross in order to reverse the effects of original sin from the fall of Adam and Eve in the Garden of Eden. Jesus died so that we might live.

That is why, on this day, we recall Jesus as the Suffering Servant. In the Hebrew Bible reading from Isaiah, we remember the one who has “borne our infirmities” and “carried our diseases.” Like the suffering servant, Jesus was “wounded for our transgressions” and “crushed for our iniquities.” Like the sacrificial lamb that was slaughtered in the Jerusalem Temple on the eve of Passover, Jesus is the Paschal Lamb who takes away the sins of the world.

But Good Friday is not just about a bloody theology of sacrificial atonement. It is also “good” because we acknowledge that God knows intimately what it’s like to suffer. Our triune God is not some disconnected deity who is sitting on a heavenly throne and far removed from human experience. Through the incarnation of Christ Jesus, God took on human flesh and died a shameful and excruciating death on the cross.

The passion and the crucifixion are reminders of Jesus’ unwavering presence with us. Christ is never absent to us, no matter how painful our lives might be. Christ is always present and in solidarity with our suffering. Although we may never know the reason for unjust or unexplained suffering, we can be sure that Christ is always with us.

This is why Good Friday is not just a day of mourning. We venerate the cross, not as an instrument of death, but as a means for eternal life. The cross is not just the equivalent of an electric chair, a firing-squad rifle, or a syringe for lethal injection. Rather, the cross is the new tree of life by which death itself has been destroyed. A good Friday, indeed.

The promise of Emmanuel – “God with us” – at Advent and Christmas comes full circle at Holy Week. God is always present with us, even on Good Friday. God is always present with us, even in the depths of our own greatest sorrow and pain. And God is always present with us, even in the depths of the suffering of this world. Because God has literally been to hell and back.

We will soon say the Solemn Collects together. The collects are an important liturgical act by which all of us, in exercising our baptismal priesthood, intercede for all of humanity. In that way, the entire world is present with us as we kneel in silent prayer.

After the Solemn Collects, we will venerate the cross and show our faith in the triune God who is always present with us. We never need to say “I miss you” to God. We never need to say “*Tu me manques*” or “you are absent to me” to God. We never need to say, “My God, my God, why have you forsaken me?” Because God is always there saying first: “I am with you.” Even – or perhaps especially – on Good Friday.